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ABSTRACT

The logic and the benefits of requiring college students in basic speech communication classes to tape-record oral journals are set forth along with a detailed description of the assignment. Instructions to the students explain the mechanics of the assignment as follows: (1) obtain and properly label a quality cassette tape; (2) make seven extemporaneous, three-minute entries during the semester; (3) listen to the instructor's critique of the first two entries so that the final five entries can be improved; and (4) include observation, analysis, and application as parts of each entry. The difficulty of establishing criteria for grading is discussed as are the benefits of the oral journal to the professor as well as to the student. (EM)

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Captain's Log. . . The Speech Communication Oral Journal

by

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Captain's Log . . . The Speech Communication Oral Journal

William F. Strong

Requiring students to write journals as a means of teaching them to synthesize and apply course content is widespread. Probably, journals are used mostly in English courses but also abound in Speech Communication, Psychology, Sociology, History, and Philosophy curricula. In English, journals assist students in attaining writing skills since they are forced to write about something with which they are familiar. Most every accomplished writer prescribes the same methodology for the would be writer: "The best way to learn to write is to write." Conversely, we in Speech Communication who require journals attempt to teach students oral communication by having them chronicle their life experiences and observations in writing. It is a paradox, and an unnecessary paradox, when one considers that oral journals are so possible, practical, and ultimately beneficial in teaching the student.

Having made this observation, I required an oral journal of each student in seven of my basic Speech Communication classes at a major Southwestern university (the study required a full year). The assignment was presented to the students as follows.

Mechanics

1. You should purchase a 60 minute, quality cassette tape. It is suggested that you avoid bargain tapes or previously used tapes because of the multiplicity of problems they may cause—i.e., failure to record audibly over previous recordings; breakage.
2. Write your name, section number, and class hour on the cassette tape or on the *cassette case* so the information can be read without having to open the case.
3. During the semester you should produce seven journal entries, beginning on "Side 1" or "A," preceding each with, "Journal entry number one, two, etc." The entries should be no more

than three minutes each and should be extemporaneous in vocal style. Five weeks into the term the tapes will be collected and the first two entries will be reviewed but not graded by your instructor. Your instructor will record brief suggestions for improvement on your tape immediately following your second entry. Your tape will be returned and you should listen to your instructor's critique so that you can improve your final five entries. The five final entries will be graded at the end of the term and will constitute your entire grade for the oral journal.

Content

The oral journal is based on the old adage, "Observation brings wisdom, not old age." The content of your journal is designed to make practical use of the communication principles you learn from textbook and lecture. The oral journal should help you internalize and retain this information so that it will assist you throughout your life. Each entry should consist of three parts.

1. Observation

   You should record an observation that relates to communication. Since communication, in its broadest sense, pervades everything, you are not limited. Simply relate the basic story—what you saw, heard, felt, etc.

2. Analysis

   Analyze what you observed. Ask "why" often. Until you ask why you don't know anything. Do not settle for the obvious, but probe deeply into the anatomy of the communication act. Be certain you employ the communication terms from the textbook and lecture as conduct your analysis.

3. Application

   Now that you have observed and analyzed a communication act, how can you use this newly acquired knowledge? How will it help you

now in interpersonal relations and later in your professional and family life?

Making The Grade

It is desireable to have form and structure in your entries, but do not permit your creativity to be stifled. Internalize the format, the principle for any good journal, but employ them in a way that assists your personal style. Communication is so varied that no absolute structure can be used to analyze all acts in all contexts.

You are not to write out your entries and read them while taping. Written and oral language are vastly different. Just talk to the recorder as if it were your roommate, friend, or spouse. Be personal with it. If you discover that you cannot "just talk" an entry, then make brief notes and elaborate on the notes. Memorized or reading qualities in the voice result in the entries receiving a lower grade.

Finally, you will not be assigned a grade for each entry, but rather your instructor will assign your grade based on his response to the overall quality of your journal.

Those were the instructions the students received. From the viewpoint of the instructor who is considering such an assignment, several criticisms are predictable: How does one insure that each student will have access to a recorder? On what standards does one grade such a journal? How can one spend such a prohibitive amount of time grading one assignment.

Insuring access to a recorder is accomplished with minimal effort. Due to our society's saturation with cassette recorders, the majority of students have their own cassette recorder or a friend from whom they can borrow one. For the student who is insufficiently motivated to secure the use of a recorder on his own, it is best to furnish him with a list of available recorders on campus, such as those in the library or media centers. Placing several units on reserve will invalidate excuses claiming

that recorders were "always checked out."

The greatest difficulty with this assignment was establishing criteria for grading. When the assignment was written for the students, I had to predict standards that would be employed in grading. That, unfortunately, is a detriment indigenous to novel assignments. Eventually, my criteria for grading settled into a dichotomy consisting of content and style of delivery. Content required proper use of terms and valid conclusions; consequently, analysis proved disconcerting, but challenging nonetheless. Delivery required extemporaneous, non-reading qualities that avoided excessive use of vocal fillers and hesitancies.

These criteria proved marginally satisfactory. In retrospect, this assignment would have equal success as a non-graded requirement of the course. Such an arrangement would reduce anxiety for the student and evaluation time for the instructor.

The greatest number of students recording journals in one semester was 84. Admittedly, grading that number of journals consumed a prohibitive amount of time. In another term, however, grading journals for two classes totalling 42 students was manageable, even enjoyable. With experience I became proficient in my responses and creative in the time I used to listen to the tapes. For example, listening to tapes could be done while driving or cooking. When I was too tired to read papers or simply needed a diversion from that mode of grading, I could listen to tapes. However, a non-graded version of this assignment would reduce the time required for grading since it would require only review of the tapes.

DISCUSSION

The benefits of the oral journal are numerous and extend to the professor as well as the student. The professor, for instance, can provide the oral equivalent of a two or three page written critique with much less effort. He can correct the student on uses and pronunciations of words and even relate stories to the student relative to his taped entry, all of which are precluded, for the most part, in written critiques. Like the student, the professor records comments and is thereby inspired to refine his own pro-

nunciation and articulation. Such oral critiques are personable and increase the rapport between the students and their professor.

There is no other assignment that the author has personally conducted which has provided such oral improvement in student performance on other assignments. This was an unexpected outcome of the study. The author had no intention nor suspicion that it would produce the finest speaking rounds of any basic sections he had ever taught. As one student said in his journal:

> *I had no idea that this would help so much. I hated it at first—felt stupid talking to a machine, just like I do when I talk to a telephone answering device. But I'm shy and I have always been shy. I never got a chance in any discussion to talk about what I think for more than a minute without somebody cutting me off. This gave me the chance to do that. It was hard at first, but I got used to it. I can't say I ever learned to really like it, but I know it was good for me and made giving the speech easier.*

Another student isolated other benefits:

> *I hated my voice at first, but you told us why. Since I've been doing this, I've learned to think of it as a mirror for the voice. What if there were no mirrors in the world and no one ever looked at how they looked? Nobody would have their hair combed and there wouldn't be any makeup. That's the way our voices are. At least by hearing yourself on tape you feel like you should clean it up a bit. I don't know if I've really improved or just gotten used to the horrible way I sound, but I feel better about it and that's worth something, I guess.*

The author did not request that students like the method and had requested no response to it. The students responded on their own initiative. Of course, this is not a scientific, controlled methodology. The author cannot prove that his students improved in other oral exercises because of this assignment. However, other speech communication instructors who have employed the method have noted a greater degree of improvement in

other oral assignments than was expected from the use of traditional methods. This assignment requires a great deal of time, especially with 168 students, but if only one section were taught, the time constraints would be manageable. The most significant aspect of this assignment is that it begins to provide students with all the attributes of an effective, thinking communicator. It prepares them to express views extemporaneously in a world tending toward increasing orality. Certainly students are tested orally in contemporary life far more than in writing. In Speech Communication, if no where else, we should be creating methods for making our students articulate in an inarticulate society. It is the greatest gift we can provide.